

Abraham Lincoln

By EDWARD S. BEACH

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TO
ALFRED S. WOODWORTH,
WILLIAM M. BULLIVANT, HERBERT E. DAVIDSON, JAMES R. DUNBAR,
GEORGE M. GARLAND, WILLIAM V. KELLEN, ARTHUR
LORD, FRANK S. SHERBURNE, AND
JOHN G. WRIGHT,

GREETING :

LORD BACON SAITH,

“ A principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fulness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce. We know diseases of stoppings and suffocations are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind; you may take sarza to open the liver; steel to open the spleen; flour of sulphur for the lungs; castoreum for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart of a true friend, to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart, to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession.”

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Born, February 12, 1809

Died, April 15, 1865

IN the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln was born, ninety-five years ago to-day. When he was seven years old, the Lincolns moved into Indiana, occupying for a time a half-faced camp some fifty miles from his birthplace in Kentucky. The whole country was a wilderness watered by many rivers and dotted with the infrequent clearings of pioneers.

“It was a wild region,” said Lincoln, “with many bears and other animals still in the woods, and there were some schools, so-called ; but no qualification was ever required for a teacher beyond readin’, writin’ and cypherin’ to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand Latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked on as a wizard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education.”

Men of elemental natures frequently possess such intuitive apprehension and comprehension of essential truth that they require little instruction. Their efficient education is silently wrought in nature’s alembic, far from academic groves, and

untrammelled by the laborious learning of schools. Without the aid of book learning, they go straight to the mark by directness and clearness of inner vision. The world bears witness of this from Homer to Shakespeare, and from Shakespeare to Chief Justice Marshall.

Lincoln grew up in the school of practical experience, and his intuitions were intensified by the exigencies of life. His great height, six feet four inches, long arms and sinewy frame made him a powerful axman and a redoubtable wrestler; and, while still in his teens, his comrades recognized him as a leader both in physical activities and mental aptitudes.

Behold the curriculum of his boyhood and youth: "He and I," said John Hanks, "worked barefoot, grubbed it, plowed, mowed, and cradled together; plowed corn, gathered it, and shucked corn." Then, an assistant on a flat-boat trading to New Orleans; a builder of log-cabins; a clearer of primeval woodlands; a splitter of rails; a builder of flat-boats; a river trader; a store-keeper; a mill superintendent; a captain of volunteers against Black Hawk; an enlisted private at the front in the same campaign; a pushing candidate for the Legislature at the age of 23; a law-student; postmaster from 1833 to 1836; a deputy county surveyor; a member of the Legislature in 1834, 1836, 1838 and 1840; and all by the time he was thirty.

Bearing in mind the geographical and social environment, consider for a moment certain striking particulars of these formative years. "He was a tall, gaunt young man, dressed in a suit of blue homespun jeans, consisting of a round-about jacket, waistcoat, and breeches which came to within about four inches of his feet. The latter were encased in raw-hide

boots, into the tops of which, most of the time, his pantaloons were stuffed. He wore a soft felt hat which had at one time been black, but was now sun burned until it was, as Lincoln said, a combine of colors."

At the age of twenty-three, Lincoln entered politics, in New Salem, as a candidate for the Legislature. He had been absent in the Black Hawk campaign and was known to but few of the electors in the county. He had no opportunity for electioneering, and there were thirteen candidates. The successful candidate received 1127 votes and Lincoln 657, his own precinct of New Salem casting 277 votes for and only three against him. But the more remarkable fact is that in his address to the people of Sangamon County, he very ably considered local transportation problems, discussing the advantages but prohibitive expense of building a railroad into the country, and consequently advocating the improvement of the Sangamon River. In dealing with the question of improving the river, he drew on his own experiences with flat-boats, his first trip in which was taken at the age of nineteen, and the second two years later, both to New Orleans. At this time the first American locomotive was only a year old. Lincoln in the West was abreast of the times in the East.

In this period, the firm of Lincoln and Berry bought Herndon Brothers' store at New Salem, giving notes in payment. The business was a failure. Seventeen years later, after returning from Congress, Lincoln paid the last of the obligations. He called them his national debt. Years before the debt was finally paid, judgment for one of the notes was levied on his horse, saddle, bridle and surveying instruments.

In 1834, Lincoln was elected to the Legislature. The campaign themes were of local importance, and related to a government canal from Lake Michigan to the Illinois river; Sangamon river improvements; location of the State capital at Springfield; a United States bank; better road laws, and estray laws. Lincoln was now twenty-five years old, and again he was publicly discussing substantial issues. He was now studying law, and was finally admitted to practice at Springfield in 1836. In 1838 and 1840, the Whig minority in the Illinois House of Representatives gave him their full party vote for Speaker,—a mark of great respect and the highest compliment they could pay him. He himself had earned the honor.

The untutored, unsophisticated, unabashed son of the backwoods, born poor and without influential friends, was now in public life and recognized as a sound debater of important questions; and only twenty-five! His, indeed, is a marvelous record. Let us, therefore, inquire more closely into the formative experiences and influences of these apprentice years.

The first books which Lincoln knew were the Bible, Robinson Crusoe, Pilgrim's Progress, a History of the United States, a Life of Washington, and the Statutes of Indiana, but he himself said that in addition to these he had "read through every book he had ever heard of in that county for a circuit of fifty miles."

At New Salem, schoolmaster Graham, a friend of Lincoln's, said to him respecting the study of English grammar, "If you expect to go before the public in any capacity, I think it the best thing you can do." Six miles distant, a grammar was found and Lincoln absorbed it. At New Salem he

formed his life-long friendship with Jack Kelso, a thriftless fisherman, whose memory was replete with passages from Burns and Shakespeare, and who led Lincoln into acquaintanceship with these masters. In the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, Burns and Shakespeare, an ambitious youth of active intellect, as Lincoln was, could not fail to find the loftiest of inspirations and conceptions, as well as burning ideas of duty to himself, to the public, and to the State. During this formative period of his life, Lincoln drank deep from these clear springs of English, and it is said that his devotion to literature and law studies had somewhat to do with Lincoln and Berry's failure to keep their store with commercial success.

Books make up a microcosm for the man of constructive imagination. By power of imagination, in this microcosm, he realizes the lives of saints and sinners, of lords and peasants, of generals and governors, and silently draws out of himself those intuitions which, combined with extending observation and experience, amount in the end to solid education. How can it be otherwise? In what school was Socrates fitted for college; in what college was he trained for a university; from what university did he receive a degree? In truth, Socrates fitted and trained himself, and founded his own "thinking-shop of wise spirits," as Aristophanes dubbed it. Abraham Lincoln, the barefooted child of toil, was born in the purple of this eternally existing aristocracy of wise spirits.

Lincoln's education was ample for Lincoln; and there is no mystery about his literary style. He was born in the forest and he traveled on rivers; and it is not possible for an intellectual man to see sunlit and moonlit skies, to look

on glittering constellations, or to hear woodland voices, the murmuring of brooks, and the soft, somnolent splash of rivers, without developing style. Some, like Robert Louis Stevenson, accomplish style by the midnight oil, but others inhale and exhale it. Nature provides it. The crow's harsh caw is the crow's style; the woodland notes of the veery are the veery's style. Style is a matter of in-birth. Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Burke and Webster manifest the truth that style harks back to heaven, and Lincoln's style was but the outward and visible sign of mental lucidity and inward, spiritual grace.

During the first thirty years, Lincoln buffeted the world, and the world buffeted Lincoln. In 1835, Ann Rutledge, — Lincoln's first love, — died, and he seemed to his friends "to be in the shadow of madness." "I have loved the name of Rutledge to this day," said Lincoln after he became President. Incessant labor, ambition, intellectual activity, upward flights of soul, the joys and sorrows of love, and a considerable variety of environment, combined during his first thirty years to mold Abraham Lincoln, and to develop and solidify his natural common sense. In the University of Experience, Lincoln enrolled himself among the Sons of Wisdom.

"Here the heart

May give a useful lesson to the head

And Learning wiser grow without his books."

Lincoln was pre-eminently a man of level judgment,—patient, calm, far-seeing, merciful, affectionate and just. His heart was always right, his judgment seldom wrong.

In 1846 he was elected to Congress, at the age of thirty-seven, and served one term, then ceasing to take an active

part in politics, and devoting himself assiduously to the practice of his profession. In 1854, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him to political action. Subsequently he declared of slavery: "I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world. . . . Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature — opposition to it in his love of justice."

From 1840 to 1861, he was often engaged in cases before the Supreme Court of Illinois. In the number of cases before this Court he was exceeded by none of his contemporaries. In 1855 he was retained in a patent case involving the McCormick reaping-machine patents. In this case the late Edward N. Dickerson, senior counsel of the Bell Telephone Company, Reverdy Johnson, and George Harding were also engaged. One of Lincoln's early cases in the Supreme Court of Illinois involved the freedom of a negro girl. A significant point of his argument was that by the law of nations no person could be sold in a free State. The legal aspects of the slavery question, with all its ramifications, including American constitutional law and the rights of States, thus early engaged his professional attention, with results that were epoch-making a few years later.

Lincoln's had been a many-sided, practical and responsible life when he came to the White House; and the notion that Abraham Lincoln suffered in the school of adversity and was employed in the field of obscurity, before he came out of the West, is purely sybaritic. The conditions which surrounded him in boyhood and youth were those encountered by most pioneers, and in Lincoln's case, as well as in thousands of others, were merely tonic.

Between February and May, 1856, the Republican party in Illinois was definitely organized at meetings held in Decatur and Bloomington. Kansas was then in the hands of a pro-slavery mob, and the Union was breaking and shivering and waiting for a leader. On May 29, 1856, Lincoln was called for at the Bloomington Convention, and it is recounted:—

“As he turned to his audience, there came gradually a great change upon his face. ‘There was an expression of intense emotion,’ said Judge Scott. ‘It was the emotion of a great soul. Even in stature he seemed greater. He seemed to realize it was a crisis in his life.’”

Here it was that Lincoln exclaimed: “Kansas shall be free.” “Slavery must be kept out of Kansas.” “Slavery is a violation of the eternal right. We have temporized with it from the necessities of our condition, but as sure as God reigns and school-children read, that black, foul lie can never be consecrated into God’s hallowed truth.” “We will say to the Southern Disunionists, ‘We won’t go out of the Union and you sha’n’t.’”

It is unnecessary to discuss the Lincoln-Douglas debates and political events leading up to Lincoln’s election to the presidency in November, 1860, or the memorable events of the succeeding years. We now contemplate the man, and seek the principle of his conduct.

That principle was a reverence for law and a passion for justice; and for this reason his eminent and honorable professional career is especially interesting, for therein he absorbed the legal principles which centuries of experience have demonstrated to lie at the foundation of substantial justice.

Lincoln's reverence for and insistence upon obedience to law made him a safe President. The Trent affair is one illustration of his obedience to law as a matter of principle and in the face of popular disapproval, although it is evident that Lincoln's obedience to law in this instance was combined with the shrewdest diplomacy. The diplomacy, however, was his own and not that of his political advisers.

Captain Wilkes, in October, 1861, boarded the English mail steamer Trent, and took from under the protection of the British flag, against the protest of the captain of the Trent, Slidell and Mason, who were on the way to Europe as envoys of the Confederacy. Although the proceeding was a violation of the law of nations, the Secretary of the Navy complimented Captain Wilkes; the House of Representatives passed him a vote of thanks; and enthusiastic meetings, voicing vociferous approval, were held throughout the North, notably in Tammany Hall, in Cooper Institute, and in Faneuil Hall. In spite of popular approval of the seizure, Lincoln's conclusion was:

"We must stick to American principles concerning the rights of neutrals. We fought Great Britain for insisting by theory and practice on the right to do exactly what Captain Wilkes has done. . . . We must give them up, apologize for the act as a violation of our own doctrines, and thus forever bind her over to keep the peace in relation to neutrals, and so acknowledge that she has been wrong for sixty years."

They were given up on January 1, 1862, but apparently with much reluctance on the part of the bellicose Secretary Seward, who, in his impertinent and ridiculous "Thoughts for the President's Consideration, April 1, 1861," proposed

to "demand explanations from Spain and France categorically, at once," and, in the absence of satisfactory explanations, to "declare war against them;" and at the same time to "seek explanations from Great Britain and Russia, and send agents into Canada, Mexico and Central America, to raise a vigorous continental spirit of independence on this continent against European intervention."

In releasing Slidell and Mason, Lincoln, the patriot, the emancipator, and the saviour of the Republic, evinced high moral courage. The flag above prisoners over whom it had been illegally raised was hauled down, and this act deserves patriotic remembrance. In ignoring the hot-headed, impetuous advice of the strenuous Secretary of State, the common sense of the backwoodsman triumphed over the vagaries of the academic, and shows that level judgment is the most important trait in Presidents.

This level judgment, reverence for law and insistence on obedience to law were distinguishing characteristics of Abraham Lincoln. The memorable words of the first Inaugural resound through time like a cry from the ancient prophets:—

"You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect and defend it. You can forbear the assault upon it; I cannot shrink in the defence of it."

Lincoln and Seward stand out in the perspective of American history as distinct types: the rail-splitter, a man of power without pretense; the polished, learned, political virtuoso, a man of pretense without power. The first, a leader of the people; the second, a leader of a coterie. Lincoln kept Seward's All Fools' Day memorandum a secret and Seward

passed for a statesman. When the memorandum was made public, a quarter of a century later, the illusion was dissipated. That Lincoln quietly caused Seward to realize the latter's relative insignificance is shown by two episodes which illustrate Lincoln's ability to use and master men. Shortly after submitting his Thoughts, the Secretary wrote: "There is but one vote in the Cabinet and that is cast by the President." Four years later, when Lincoln sent the Secretary of State to meet the Confederate Peace Commissioners at the Hampton Roads Conference, the President concluded his instructions with a direction that must have been as wormwood and gall to the man who, a month after the first inauguration, apparently had said sympathetically to himself,—"*Ah, this Crudity! As a Statesman, I must extricate him from his slough of ineptitude.*"

Lincoln's stinging direction was, "You will hear all that they may choose to say, and report to me. *You will not assume to definitely consummate anything.*" It is not difficult to imagine the grim smile that played over the President's face, as he wrote these words while recalling, perhaps, certain paragraphs of Seward's "Thoughts for the President's Consideration:" "We are at the end of a month's administration, and yet without a policy, either domestic or foreign. This, however is not culpable . . . But further delay to adopt and prosecute our policies for both domestic and foreign affairs would not only bring scandal on the administration, but danger on the country. . . . But whatever policy we adopt, there must be an energetic prosecution of it. For this purpose it must be somebody's business to pursue and direct it incessantly. Either the President must do it himself, and be all the while active in it, *or devolve it on some member of his*

Cabinet. Once adopted, debates on it must end, and all agree and abide. *It is not my especial province. But I neither seek to evade nor assume responsibility.*"

Lincoln's "*You will not assume to definitely consummate anything,*" of 1865, when contrasted with Seward's "*I neither seek to evade nor assume responsibilities,*" of 1861, seems to bear a certain satirical emphasis intended for Seward's personal edification, and suggests the marvelous firmness and patience possessed by the great American.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Lincoln was his independence in conclusion and action. At the Cabinet meeting of September 22, 1862, when he read the second draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, in the presence of the Cabinet members, Stanton, Chase, Wells, Smith, Swan, Blair and Bates, who were strong and influential politicians, and only two of whom, Stanton and Chase, in reality approved of the measure, he said to them :—

"I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter, for that I have determined for myself. This I say without intending anything but respect for any one of you. But I already know the views of each on this question. They have been heretofore expressed, and I have considered them as thoroughly and carefully as I can. What I have written is that which my reflections have determined me to say. If there is anything in the expressions I use, or in any minor matter, which any of you thinks had best be changed, I shall be glad to receive suggestions."

These were the words of a considerate but inflexible master.

Lincoln was no time-server, and therefore he served all time. He neither groveled for the rumble of popular applause, nor harked for the movement of party managers; but his soul was open for the quickening consciousness of that law "whose seat is the bosom of God, her voice the harmony of the world: all things in heaven and earth do her homage, the very least as feeling her care, and the greatest as not exempted from her power." He was, however, no vague theorist in the administration of justice; for experience, while teaching him the fundamental wisdom of ideal law, also taught him its reasonable application. His brotherly hand was constantly outstretched for the protection of those condemned to imprisonment or death, for military faults, and therein especially he tempered justice with mercy.

It is sometimes said, and perhaps with some degree of inconsequential truth, that Lincoln was a man of imperfect manners, and that his character was blemished by the telling of coarse stories; but it is to be remembered that it is the fate of illustrious men of wit and humor to be charged with acts they never commit, and the recital of stories they never tell.

Immediately before Lincoln announced what he had decided respecting the Emancipation Proclamation, he read to the Cabinet members a chapter from Artemus Ward; and his sometimes seeming trivialities were very frequently a necessary amulet, not against monks and legates, as with Rabelais, but against Cabinet members, obstructors, doubters, office-hunters, sutlers, contractors, speculators, peculators, and grafters of all degrees, that locust-like, buzzed around his ears in Washington.

In "My Diary North and South," Russell, the accomplished correspondent of the *London Times*, commonly known as "Bull Run Russell," recounted :

"In the conversation which occurred before dinner, I was amused to observe the manner in which Mr. Lincoln used the anecdotes for which he is famous. Where men bred in courts, accustomed to the world, or versed in diplomacy, would use subterfuge, or would make a polite speech, or give a shrug of the shoulders as the means of getting out of an embarrassing position, Mr. Lincoln raises a laugh by some bold west-country anecdote, and moves off in the cloud of merriment produced by his joke."

"Amid the fickle and faint-hearted throng
His heart was ever steadfast, brave and strong.
His counsel gave us light,
His courage gave us might
To see the right, to wrestle with the wrong."

Lincoln was a man of the people and for the people, and in relation to slavery especially, his was the fine spirit of Aeschylus :

"The old Injustice joys to breed
Her young, instinct with villainous deed ;
The young her destined hour will find
To rush in mischief on mankind ;
She, too, in Ate's murky cell
Brings forth the hideous child of hell,
A burden to the offended sky,
The power of bold impiety.
But Justice bids her ray divine
E'en on the low-roofed cottage shine,
And beams her glories on the life
That knows not fraud or ruffian strife."

In Abraham Lincoln, the Kentucky forest rendered unto the ages an immortal memory. He was a man of far-sightedness, of fortitude, of long-suffering, of truth, of fidelity, and of law, and by virtue of sound judgment and moral greatness in Protean labors for Freedom and Union, now sleeps with the makers of States and Empires.



